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Grass Widow

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J.V. BRUMMELS

Grass Widow

The sun finds a notch in the ozone
and burns through a lens of humidity.
Every pickup fishtails at every gravel corner.

I drive south across two counties,
the wet-paint splatter of drizzle
on the four-lane enough to idle
the chemical rigs in miles of fields,
earth no longer turned, simply
sterilized for a new crop no one wants.

To a courthouse, monumental
above the fastfood arches
and cars lined up for coffee
and some egg and pigmeat sandwiches,
maybe some flash-fried potatoes.

Past deputies and metal detectors,
the new terrific security,
to stand beside this young mother
at her arraignment. Her men are gone,
the first to a new woman north of the river,
the next to the place junkies go in lieu of jail.

What's behind it all? Some handy
farm or household chemicals
distilled and needled to the blood.
I witness her sign away her children.

The hanging judge harangues.
The silent reporter keeps it all in shorthand.
The marshal clasps his hands behind his back.
This present carries the weight of the past
like a heavy pistol high on the hip.

Back years: in the day
of zero tolerance and just say no,
thank you, I hold this woman
a girl no bigger than a whisper
on my lap while hand joins hand
joins hand as the joint is passed
around the kitchen table.

Back years again: WPA workers
finish pouring the counted tons
of concrete of this courthouse,
paint the halls and offices,
scatter ashtrays and spittoons
around the courtroom
where they'll be handy
for snuffdippers like me.

And again: just a meeting of two rivers,
some plank shacks on a mud street,
prostitutes waving from spindly balconies,
grass waving from the treeless hills above.

And somewhere anchored on that green sea
a young mother waits at a table in a soddy,
dust sifting on the fine-haired heads
of her toddling children, for a husband
gone after gold or the herds, his distant death
by drowning or bad horse or lightning bolt
bad news the wind is whispering.